



VOL. XIX.—No. 950.]

MARCH 12, 1898.

[PRICE ONE PENNY.

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI: AN APPRECIATION.

By ISABELLA FYVIE MAYO.



CHRISTINA G. ROSSETTI, WITH HER MOTHER, FRANCES M. L. ROSSETTI.

*After the Chalk Drawing by D. G. Rossetti, made in 1877, and now in the National Portrait Gallery.
From a Photograph by F. Hollyer.*



W women are sometimes sorely tempted to fancy that we have gifts and graces which have been smothered and stultified by adverse circumstances. We bewail that we have never got our chance. It is possible that men are not exempt

from this failing, but there are some reasons why they have less temptation to it. All biography is full of stories of men who have triumphed over every sort of obstacle and disability, and a man can scarcely realise any disadvantages of his own lot, whatever they may be, without recalling some other man who was strong and brave enough to master similar drawbacks. Then, again, the difficulties or hindrances to a man's career are generally of an active nature, so that if there be any "go" at all in him, he understands at once that they serve only to test his strength and energy.

But with women there is a difference, less indeed than it used to be, but still persisting and likely to persist. First, they have comparatively little biographical guidance. And such biography of women as there is, deals chiefly with women of high place and fortune, of rare, adventurous career, or of tragic eminence of some sort. The peculiar difficulties and discouragements which beset most of their sex, seldom come much into such women's lives. Those women's lives whose history, experience and result would most benefit the majority of their sisters, remain yet for the most part unwritten.

This is why we wish to have a little talk over Christina Rossetti, the poet who not very long ago passed from us, and whom the verdict of critics ventures to place in comparison not only with Jean Ingelow but with Mrs. Barrett-Browning. For we think the story of her life is one which may come with peculiar strengthening and comfort to many a disheartened girl and woman. Yet had she happened to fall even just below the very high level of poetic power to which she rose, or had she chanced to lack the one advantage which her life possessed, it is very likely the world would never have heard a word of her life's history.

She was born in a prosy, dingy district of London, one of the long uniform streets lying to the south-east of Regent's Park, and then as now, the haunt of foreign refugees of every shade of political opinion. She herself was the daughter of an Italian refugee, and her mother was the daughter of another Italian, so it was by right only of her mother's English mother that Christina Rossetti could claim to be English.

Her father, who gained his livelihood as a teacher of Italian and who eventually became professor of that language at King's College, was somewhat of a poet, a great student of Dante, and altogether a clever and interesting man. Her two brothers, a little older than herself, have both reached celebrity, the elder of the two, the poet-painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, attaining great fame, though he was a man of an unfortunate temperament leading to an unhappy history.

But from the first, it is evident that the paramount influence in Christina's life was that of her mother, a woman of sweet character, but one who, in modern parlance, "did nothing," save the housekeeping and mothering of a little household whose means were at once narrow and precarious.

The little girl throve somewhat feebly in her London home. She did not go to school, gaining all substantial instruction from her mother. Though we hear that she enjoyed *Hone's Every Day Book* when she was nine, she does not seem to have been a specially

bookish child, not so bookish as the elder sister and the two brothers, who were her only youthful companions. For visitors, there were only bearded Italian "patriots," in whose tragic histories, however, the well-trained little ones had sense and sympathy enough to take interest—Christina, with characteristic faithfulness, cherishing a relic of one all her life long, so that it stood in the chamber of her death-bed.

For pleasures, she had games with her brothers and sister, walks in Regent's Park, every corner of which she knew, investing the more picturesque points with romantic characteristics which would have escaped less poetic eyes. Above all, she had occasional visits to her maternal grandfather at Holmer's End—about thirty miles from London, a distance which in those days involved six hours driving in a stage coach! There she got her first revelation of the beauty of genuine nature and the first inspiration of her love and sympathy for the undomesticated animal creation. For animals nearer us, she had already learned a tender affection, for some of her earliest verses, written when she was about sixteen, were "On the Death of a Cat, a friend of mine, aged ten years and a half." Her happy visits to Holmer End ceased when she was about nine, at which time her grandfather removed to London and became a near neighbour. The old gentleman was very fond of little Christina, and prophesied great things of her. To the very end of her life she cherished the memory of these country visits, and spoke of the way in which they had awakened her imagination. A book, *Time Flies*, which she wrote fully forty years afterwards, abounds with allusions to those early days, whose slight incidents, indelibly impressed on her sensitive mind, she often wove into exquisite parables.

Another youthful joy lay in visits to the Zoological Gardens, though there her feeling was that the imprisoned birds should sing "plaintive verses." It is said that, as a child, she told of a strange dream she had. "She thought she was in Regent's Park at dawn, while, just as the sun rose, she seemed to see a wave of yellow light sweep from the trees. It was a multitude of canaries, thousands of them, all the canaries in London. They had met and were now going back to captivity."

A most interesting reminiscence of her childhood we find, when, veiling her own identity, she told—

"I know of a little girl who, not far from half a century ago, having heard that oil calmed troubled waters, suggested to her mother its adoption for such a purpose in case of a sea-storm.

"Her suggestion fell flat, as from her it deserved to fall. Yet nowadays here is science working out the babyish hint of ignorance."

She called herself "the ill-tempered one of the family," there having been, in her earlier life, a decidedly irritable strain in her disposition, partly caused by the infirmity of her health. "In later life," says her last biographer, Mackenzie Bell, "this was entirely conquered, and this conquest strengthened her character, as moral conquests ever do strengthen the character."

As Christina advanced into young womanhood the family means grew narrower. The brothers had not yet had time to make any mark in their respective careers, the father was growing old and feeble, and not only so, but his subject, Italian, was giving place to German as a favourite study. One of those critical times came when a household is brought to realise that "something must be done." It was decided that Mrs. Rossetti and Christina should start a little school. The experiment was first made in the house where the family had lived for some time, near Mornington Crescent. Fifty years ago this school-keeping was the favourite resource of

gentle poverty. It would be as wrong as it is idle to wish that such avenue of profit was still open, for too often it admitted women who had little to impart beyond their own prejudices and ineptitude. It must, however, be owned that it had some advantages, since it could offer an opportunity to such women as Christina and her mother. Neither of them might have been found able to pass modern examinations or to fulfil present-day "requirements," and yet surely their sweet, conscientious natures would be a priceless influence on any young girl with whom they came in contact.

The London school-keeping, however, did not succeed. Accordingly Christina and her mother, the invalid father accompanying them, resolved to renew the experiment at Frome, Somersetshire, the brothers and the elder daughter struggling on in London.

In Frome they stayed for about a year. It is significant that this was the longest period that Christina ever lived out of London. She was not very happy while she was there; it was scarcely likely that she could be. Her father's health was failing day by day, so that he died almost immediately their sojourn at Frome came to an end. The school venture succeeded no better than the first one had done. Also Christina had not long before had her first love-affair, receiving an offer of marriage which, as happened with another offer later on, she resolutely put aside in the belief that both were accompanied by circumstances which would not have conducted to her highest spiritual life.

But all these shadows, outer and inner, did not prevent her from keeping her mind and heart open to impressions and influences. Among those dull, grey days she laid up beautiful thoughts, albeit they may be sometimes tremulous with the misgivings of a self-mistrustful heart. She tells us that on one of her country walks she found a four-leaved trefoil. She did not then know of its rarity. She says—

"Perhaps I plucked and so destroyed it: I certainly left it, for most certainly I have it not. . . . Now I would give something to recover that wonder: then, when I might have it for the carrying, I left it.

"Once missed, one may peer about in vain all the rest of one's days for a second four-leaved trefoil.

"No one expects to find whole fields of such: even one for once is an extra allowance.

"Life has, so to say, its four-leaved trefoils for a favoured few: and how many of us overlook once and finally our rare chance!"

It is pretty to know that one who read this parable sent her a gift of a four-leaved trefoil, and doubtless Christina saw a still sweeter parable in the substitution.

After the return to London, and the father's death, the little family struggled on again, its path, however steep, being at least upward. Christina did some literary work in the way of compilation and translating: she also began to publish her poems. But she was not a voluminous writer, nor was any of her work, prose or poetry, from first to last, of the class which readily commands "a large market." Consequently, though her name was more or less before the public from 1855 to her death in 1894, and though some of her best poems were produced comparatively early, yet her income from literature never exceeded—and seldom reached—£45 per annum, until 1890!

Nevertheless, through the success of the brothers and other circumstances, the family affairs grew easier. In 1861 and 1865, the younger son took his mother and Christina for visits to the continent. Neither trip exceeded six weeks in duration, nor did either go beyond tracks tolerably beaten even then: the first was to Paris and Normandy, returning by the Channel Islands; in the second, Basle, Como, Milan, Freiburg and the Black Forest were

visited. Christina wrote of those holidays that they were "enjoyable beyond words; a pleasure in one's life never to be forgotten," adding that all she had seen made her "proud of her Italian blood." It appears that the little party walked into Italy by the Pass of Mount St. Gothard, for she says: "We did not tunnel our way like worms through its dense substance. We surmounted its crest like eagles. Or, if you please, not at all like eagles, yet assuredly as like those born monarchs as it consisted with our possibilities."

If we did not know that "Uphill" (which, short as it is, remains to many minds as her masterpiece) had been written in 1858, we might imagine it to be the outcome of such a pilgrimage. Mr. Mackenzie Bell aptly says that this "brief sixteen line poem reveals quaintly, with one flash of genius, a whole philosophy of life." It is not yet so widely known as to make quotation superfluous.

UPHILL.

"Does the road wind uphill all the way?
Yes, to the very end.
Will the day's journey take the whole
long day?
From morn to night, my friend,
But is there for the night a resting place?
A bed for when the slow dark hours
begin.
May not the darkness hide it from my
face?
You cannot miss that inn.
Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?
Those who have gone before.
Then must I knock, or call when just in
sight?
They will not keep you standing at
that door.
Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?
Of labour you shall find the sum.
Will there be beds for me and all who
seek?
Yes, beds for all who come."

Much that had made the interests and pleasures of Christina's life till this time, now began to fade out of her daily living. The brothers got married. The very success of the circle of brilliant young people who had frequented the Rossetti household during its struggling time, now drew them apart into spheres of their own. So just as Christina's own genius had obtained some sort of worthy recognition (peculiarly unprofitable as it remained till long afterwards) her personal life settled down upon the narrowest lines. She was not very much over thirty when she found herself the youngest member of a household consisting of her ageing mother and two old maiden aunts. Even her elder sister, Maria Francesca, for whom Christina had a most reverent love, was much withdrawn by duties connected with an Anglican sisterhood to which she had attached herself, her younger sister Christina's self-devotion enabling her to do thus without dereliction of home duty.

Henceforth, Christina devoted herself to the old ladies, not in any self-conscious spirit of sacrifice, but with joyful loving service. From that time, with the exception of one or two brief visits to a friend in Scotland, her "holidays" were taken in little commonplace seaside or spa resorts not far from London, and always selected solely with a view to the comfort and pleasure of the seniors. She had no "study" to herself nor made her work of any importance in the household life. All her daily comings and goings were regulated in the interests of mother and aunts, so that as their age and infirmities increased, she was little seen in society, and could receive nothing in the way of formal visits in her own house—that house in Torrington Square where she lived on till her death. Indeed in time its

public rooms were converted into bedrooms for the bed-ridden sufferers.

Despite her tender love for her brother, the poet-painter Dante Gabriel, and her interest and pride in his genius, there was much in his history which must have touched her tender spirit to the quick. She was very true about it, too. She would not put a gloss on his infirmities.

There is no doubt that Christina Rossetti's love for her mother was the "grand passion" of her life. All her books, save two, were dedicated to her. After the mother's death, which occurred at a great age, and only eight years before Christina's own, they were dedicated to her memory. Through the revelations of her made by her gifted daughter, we gain a glimpse of a singularly sweet and strong character, not without some of the mental limitations common to her period, but a woman with whom tender caressing speeches were a daily habit, one delicately scrupulous in money matters and always careful how to spare trouble to everybody.

Such was the life and the surroundings which sufficed Christina Rossetti for well-nigh thirty years. From everything about her she drew good and satisfaction and delight. As a young girl she had been of pensive nature, but it was the avowed creed of her later years that "Cheerfulness is a fundamental and essential Christian virtue—the blithe cheerfulness which one can put over one's sadness like a veil—a bright-shining veil."

She was always ready to learn lessons from the quiet, patient lives about her, those, as she herself expresses it—

"Learned in life's sufficient school."

telling us how "a good, unobtrusive soul," whom we now know to have been her aunt Eliza, found comfort in the recollection "that no day lasted longer than twenty-four hours," and setting before herself and others the example of "an exemplary Christian" (her aunt Charlotte) who said "that she was never blamed without perceiving some justice in the charge." Sometimes such little autobiographic touches (their secret kept till after her death) take very beautiful form, as when she tells us—

"Once in conversation I happened to lay stress on the virtue of resignation, when the friend I spoke to depreciated resignation in comparison with conformity to the Divine will.

"My spiritual height was my friend's spiritual hillock."

Her quiet matter-of-fact "changes" sufficed to help her to vivid or beautiful imagery. The sight of a spider running down the bare wall of seaside bedroom, apparently frightened of its own huge shadow cast by the gas-jet, was to her a symbol of "an impenitent sinner who, having outlived enjoyment, remains isolated irremediably with his own horrible, loathsome self."

The sight of swallows perched on a telegraph wire at Walton-on-Naze could give rise to a parable of subtle beauty, thus—

"There they sat steadily. After a while, when someone looked again, they were gone."

"This happened so late in the year as to suggest that the birds had mustered for migration and then had started.

"The sight was quaint, comfortable-looking, pretty. The small creatures seemed so fit and so ready to launch out on their pathless journey: contented to wait, contented to start, at peace and fearless.

"Altogether they formed an apt emblem of souls, willing to stay, willing to depart."

"That combination of swallows with telegraph wire sets in vivid contrast before our mental eye the sort of evidence we put confidence in, and the sort of evidence we mistrust.

"The telegraph conveys messages from man to man.

"The swallows, by dint of analogy, of suggestion, of parallel experience, if I may call it so, convey messages from the Creator to the human creature.

"We act instantly, eagerly, on telegrams. Who would dream of stopping to question their genuineness?"

"Who, watching us, could suppose that the senders of the telegrams were fallible, and that the only Sender of providential messages is infallible?"

She had, as we have said before, that love of all created life which did not only care for those which touched her own personality, as "Muff," the pet cat, but was also aware of links between her soul and those creatures which seem remotest from humanity. She did not think all its waste which does not serve man. She sang—

"And other eyes not ours
Were made to look on flowers,
Eyes of small birds and insects small:
The deep sun-blushing rose
Round which the prickles close
Opens her bosom to them all.
The tiniest living thing
That soars on feathered wing,
Or crawls among the long grass out of
sight,
Has just as good a right
To its appointed portion of delight
As any king."

Of course, such a temperament is open to soothing and consolation which could not touch the coarser natures which have not cultivated sympathy. She tells us how in her earlier, troubled times—

"One day long ago, I sat in a certain garden by a certain ornamental water.

"I sat so long and so quietly that a wild garden creature or two made its appearance: a water-rat, perhaps, or a water-haunting bird. Few have been my personal experiences of this sort, and this one gratified me. I was absorbed that afternoon in anxious thought, yet the slight incident pleased me.

* * * * *

"Many (I hope) whom we pity as even wretched, may in reality, as I was at that moment, be conscious of some small secret fount of pleasure: a bubble, perhaps, yet lit by a dancing rainbow.

"I hope so and I think so: for we and all creatures alike are in God's hands, and God loves us."

With such thoughts and feelings, vivisection was, of course, abhorrent to her, as much from the thought of those who inflict agony as of the dumb innocent who endure it. In her quiet way she worked in the cause of mercy and justice in this matter, as also in the effort to secure better legal protection for young people under the age of responsibility. She was much interested in endeavours to help the poorest girl-workers of London, such as the match-makers, jam-makers, and rope-makers. She had a friend actively engaged in this work and used to look for her accounts with great interest, saying—

"London makes mirth, but I know God
hears
The sobs in the dark and the dropping of
tears."

She would have liked herself to join in these labours, but felt that her duties kept her at home, for though by that time her dear mother had been taken from her—doubtless leaving a void which nothing could have filled so well as active good works—the two aged invalid aunts remained.

But in neighbourly services she abounded: she was ready to seek work for the workless:

and a most touching little relic is an accidentally preserved list of seaside lodgings, with a detailed description of accommodations and charges, drawn up by her to spare trouble to a suffering lady, the wife of a valued friend. Such books as she had in her little library—which after all was not hers in a way, for she had few books save those which had been bought by her mother—were always eagerly pressed into the service of any friend likely to find them useful. Mr. Mackenzie Bell says, "Whenever Christina Rossetti wished to confer a favour, her manner of doing so was as if she were about to ask one." That is the hall-mark of God's ladyhood.

It is said she was a great judge of character and had strong likes and dislikes. But she held all this in charity. None of her parables are more telling than that which narrates how a traveller was received at a certain house with great hospitality and courtesy, so that he felt "he lacked nothing but a welcome," and so went away with a most gloomy impression, only to learn afterwards that the hosts he had thought so chill, had been bearing an irremediable grief, which they could hide from him, though they could not rejoice with him. So they had given him all they could. Her comment is—

"The fret of temper we despise may have its rise in the agony of some great, unflinching, unsuspected self-sacrifice, or in the sustained strain of self-conquest, or in the endurance of unavowed, almost intolerable pain."

Elsewhere, remarking that even our most cherished opinions are almost inevitably modified by time, she adds, with subtle wisdom—

"If even time lasts long enough to reverse a verdict of time, how much more eternity?"

"Let us take courage, secondary as we may for the present appear. Of ourselves likewise, the comparative aspect will fade away, the positive will remain."

She drained all the little pleasures of life to their last drop, loving to tend her ferns, to watch the sunlight effects in the trees of the London square, to walk in the London square itself. But let nobody think that this noble contentment is reached without effort. She was not one to talk of her struggles, but we can trace the marks of them, as it were, in her poems. She had cried—

"If I might only love my God and die!
But now He bids me love Him and live on."

She had felt—

"These thorns are sharp, yet I can tread on them;
This cup is loathsome, yet Christ makes it sweet,
My face is steadfast towards Jerusalem—
My heart remembers it.
Although to-day, I walk in tedious ways,
To-day His staff is turned into a rod,
Yet will I wait for Him the appointed days
And stay upon my God."

And thus she reached the calm heights where she could sing—

"Chimes that keep time are neither slow nor fast,
Not many are the numbered sands nor few;
A time to suffer, and a time to do,
And then the time is past."

The end came to her just when her selfless nature would have chosen, for as she had

thanked God that she was left to mourn her mother and not her mother to mourn her, so she survived till both the aged aunts were also removed. Indeed, all the family circle, save her youngest brother, had gone before her—Dante Gabriel, the unhappy genius, her sister, and both her brothers' wives.

Christina Rossetti had suffered much from physical ill-health all her life, and her end was full of bodily pain of a peculiar nature which tended to gather clouds of depression about her. But one of those who best knew and appreciated her, declares that Christina herself would accept even this with joy, could she but have realised how the thought of her passage through these deep waters must strengthen and cheer others called to follow her by the same dark way. Her beautiful spirit never failed. To the offertory of the church, in whose services she had found so much comfort, she sent the regular contribution she could no longer give with her own hand. She liked to be told when visitors called, though she could no longer see them, and she liked them to be detained till she could send down some special, kind little message. She even instructed her nurse that if a certain valued friend should call soon after her departure, that friend should be at once admitted to look on her dead face.

In person, Christina Rossetti was very attractive, though an illness from which she suffered twenty years before her death, slightly marred the beauty of her face. She had a placid, gentle manner. "In going into her house," says her biographer, "one seemed to have passed into an atmosphere of rest and of peace."

Speaking, as she spoke, in symbols, we would say that the sweetest fruits often ripen in walled gardens.

"IF LOVING HEARTS WERE NEVER LONELY—";

OR,

MADGE HARCOURT'S DESOLATION.

By GERTRUDE PAGE.

CHAPTER XXIV MORE REASONING.



THE following day Madge rose and went down to breakfast as usual, and there was no shadow of regret on her face as she sat down to the table alone.

At ten o'clock Elsie entered the room ready dressed for walking, and greeted her affectionately.

"It is a grand day for a walk," she said brightly. "I am quite looking forward to it."

Madge did not say much, but she looked pleased.

Elsie had hoped in coming early to make Guy's acquaintance, and it was with disappointment she found him absent.

"Your husband is always out," she

said frankly. "I had hoped to make his acquaintance this morning."

"He has gone away for a few days," replied Madge. "Come, shall we start? I am quite ready."

Leaving the gay shops and promenades behind them, the two friends quickly made their way out into the open country, both drinking in the fresh morning air with delight, and glorying in the invigorating atmosphere.

For some time they talked of many ordinary subjects, both feeling shy of introducing the topic uppermost in their minds.

At last Madge said quietly—

"I want to thank you for all you said yesterday. You helped me a great deal; I wish I were good like you."

"But I am not good," said Elsie, half-sadly. "Sometimes I am very far from good. I have envious rebellious thoughts still."

"Have you?" said Madge. "I shouldn't have thought it; but I am rather glad, I shall not feel so shy with you."

"Indeed, you need never feel shy with me," said Elsie warmly. "I am at best a very faulty person, but I feel very much for anyone who is unhappy and long to

help them. I hope you are going to take my advice and try not to worry and think so much. Do you think you will?"

"I don't know," replied Madge doubtfully. "I feel sure it would be a wise thing to do, but I am afraid it is an impossible one for me. Leaving things alone will not tell me where Jack is, or if I shall ever see him again." Her voice trembled a little, but she continued, "To me the present goes for very little; it is the future I care about; I want to know what comes after! I used to try and persuade myself that it was nothingness, but the very fact that I cannot rest satisfied in that belief, goes to show me that I am wrong."

"You can take it in a broader light still," said Elsie, thoughtfully. "The fact that ever since man was created, the possibility of a future life and a strong belief in it and craving for it has existed; and that, after centuries of thinking, puzzling and doubting, it still exists, goes to prove strongly that there is truth in the idea."

"It is hardly possible that anything without truth in it could have lived on in spite of the perpetual questioning and doubting to which it has always been subjected."